



Wellbeing in the Contact Centre

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A CCMA Research Initiative

Supporting Partner



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Introduction

The wellbeing of colleagues in the contact centre has a direct impact on productivity, as it affects absence, attrition and quality.

According to Deloitte the cost of absences, presenteeism and attrition across the total UK workforce increased 25% from 2019 to 2020-21, reaching more than £50 billion in 2020-21. Deloitte's analysis identifies presenteeism (defined as 'attending work in spite of illness and not performing at full ability') as the largest contributor to employers' costs of mental health, greater than absences and attrition.¹

According to the Office for National Statistics, the number of people in the UK who are economically inactive because they are long-term sick has increased to a record high.² Furthermore, according to Gallup the UK is home to one of the least engaged workforces in Europe. Gallup's analysis claims only 9% of the UK workforce is 'engaged', ranking 33rd out of 38 in Europe.³

It is against this backdrop that the CCMA publishes this research into colleague wellbeing, the most comprehensive and authoritative ever conducted for the contact centre community.

Research methodology

Led by the CCMA's Research Director, Stephen Yap, this research comprised both qualitative and quantitative methods, findings from which are integrated throughout this report.

In-depth interviews were conducted with eight advisors and team leaders. Further group discussions were convened with 11 Heads of Contact Centre and Directors. All of these conversations occurred during November and December 2022.

In addition, a structured online survey was conducted in November 2022 among n=303 frontline colleagues in the UK. To be included in the survey, participants had to be working full or part-time in an external customer-facing role with an annual salary of no more than £40,000.

With thanks to...

The CCMA extend their sincere thanks to the many industry colleagues who participated in this study. Special thanks to the following leaders for their contributions:

Julia Brown, Head of Customer Contact, Quilter

Sarah Card, Head of Delivery and Risk, Marcus by Goldman Sachs

Lucie Child, Strategy Lead, The Very Group

Daniel Cohen, Head of Customer Relations, Nespresso

Bridget Colloby, Marketing Lead – Lifestyle, Towergate Insurance

Emma Dark, Director of Consumer Care UK & IRE, Estee Lauder Companies

Claire Diamond-Howe, Change Implementation Manager, Huntswood

Georgina Gordon, Head of Wellbeing & Culture, Customer Services, Serco

Sara Morrison, Head of Outbound Acquiring, Barclaycard – Northampton

Steve Wrench, Director of Contact Centre, TieTa

¹ <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/uk/Documents/consultancy/deloitte-uk-mental-health-report-2022.pdf>

² <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/october2022>

³ <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/349484/state-of-the-global-workplace-2022-report.aspx>

Foreword from CCMA

This may be the most important research we've ever done.

Colleague wellbeing has always been a priority in contact centres, but the experiences of recent years have placed it firmly at the very top of the agenda. We may have learned to live with Covid but are now facing a crisis of another kind, with soaring inflation and rising costs putting immense pressure on household budgets.

To do justice to this most vital of topics we have done an incredibly thorough piece of research, canvassing views from across our community using multiple methods. We conducted in-depth, one-on-one conversations with people working on the front lines. We ran a structured survey comprising

several hundred frontline colleagues. We convened discussions with Heads of and Directors of contact centres representing a wide mix of sectors and organisations.

This report distils the findings from all of these conversations to offer the most comprehensive exploration yet into wellbeing in the contact centre. It will provide you with a wealth of understanding to support your efforts to nurture and protect your colleagues. Thank you for reading.



Leigh Hopwood,
CEO, CCMA

Foreword from Sabio

Today's contact centre advisors are under immense pressure.

As enterprises focus on digital transformation, improving efficiencies and enhancing customer engagement, it has fundamentally changed the nature of the advisor role forever.

Faced with handling more complex, urgent and emotional customer journeys – burnout, absenteeism, presenteeism and attrition rates are rising.

Add in challenges associated with inflation and the general cost of living, it's clear that nurturing positive mental health and wellbeing has never been more important.

At Sabio, we're strong advocates of highlighting the importance of advisor wellbeing and advisor empowerment. We believe a healthy and happy workforce directly correlates to better customer service, experiences and relations.

That's why we are proud sponsors of this exceptional and thorough piece of research conducted by the CCMA. As workplace mental health rightly moves up the executive agenda, this report is full of tangible insights in support of strategies that place the health and wellbeing of people at the heart of a vibrant and performant contact centre operation.

This research is essential reading for anyone involved in the contact centre industry. It will help to raise awareness of the benefits that positive wellbeing and advisor empowerment can bring – and not just to the contact centre itself, but the wider business overall.



Tim Pickard,
Chief Marketing Officer
Sabio Group

The post-pandemic hangover

A world still recovering from a global pandemic now faces political instability, military conflict and spiralling inflation leading to economic turmoil being felt throughout the population. Many commentators anticipate an extended period of rising costs and economic uncertainty lasting well beyond 2023.

Another huge crisis directly following the pandemic years is testing our collective resilience to an extent not experienced in generations. According to Gallup, 41% of people in the UK report experiencing 'a lot of stress' during the previous day, with the UK ranking 15th highest out of 38 countries in Europe. Nowhere is this stress more visible than on the front lines of customer contact: contact centres are the bellwether for the mood of a nation, and people who work in them must face the daily reality of reduced customer patience and heightened anxiety.

"The wellbeing of the nation is probably the lowest it's been for a long time. Often people take that out on the person who's picking up the phone to them." - Daniel Cohen, Head of Customer Relations, Nespresso

Of course, people working in contact centres are themselves going through the same burdens that customers are experiencing.

"People are still burned out from Covid and are struggling to regain the passion. When things go wrong, it's more of a problem than it was before. There's less tolerance from consumers and more pressure on the soft skills of the agent. It feels so much harder to be able to hit CSAT targets."

- Emma Dark, Director of Consumer Care UK & IRE, Estée Lauder Companies

On a positive note, the pandemic bequeathed us a heightened awareness of wellbeing and mental health, and an enhanced ability to recognise and address symptoms of ill-health and burnout.

What is wellbeing?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, wellbeing is 'the state of being healthy, happy, or prosperous; physical, psychological, or moral welfare'. Assuming one is physically healthy, wellbeing is framed in terms of mental health. Conversations with contact centre leaders identified four components underlying mental wellbeing:



⁴ <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/349484/state-of-the-global-workplace-2022-report.aspx>

⁵ <https://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/227050>

“It means that I feel content, that I have appropriate balance, that I’m living a proportionate life in terms of work, hobbies, stress.”

- Bridget Colloby, Marketing Lead – Lifestyle, Towergate Insurance

“Being the best me that I can be. Whether that’s in work or outside of work: just being the best that I can be each day.”

- Claire Diamond-Howe, Change Implementation Manager, Huntswood

Issues which affect wellbeing often arise outside of work, but work has a huge role to play in aggravating or coping.

“What we’re dealing with a lot more now are so many external things out of our control as leaders, which are impacting on our people’s resilience and make coming to work harder for them.”

- Emma Dark, Director of Consumer Care UK & IRE, Estée Lauder Companies

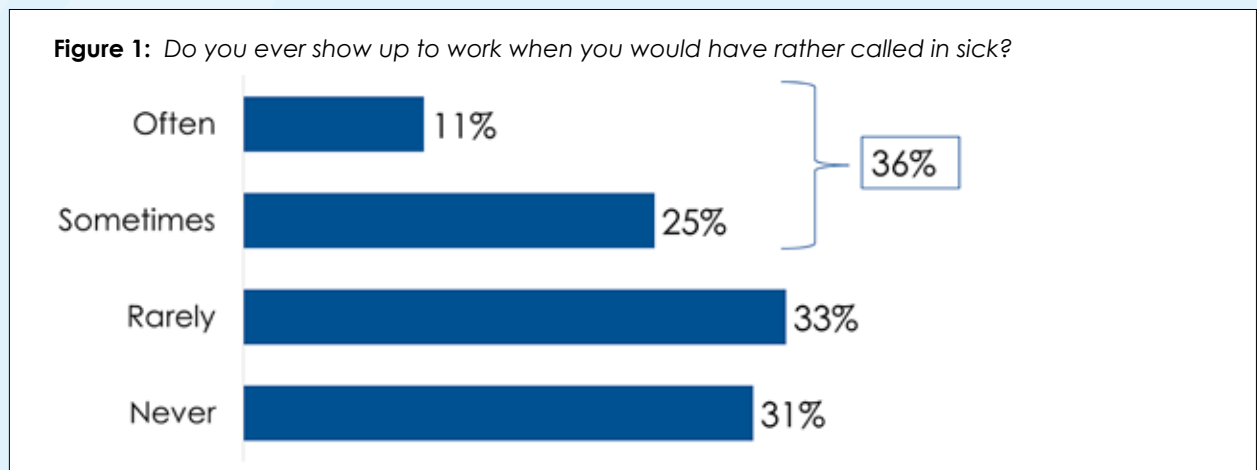
Presenteeism in the contact centre

Any discussion of presenteeism in the workplace must first acknowledge the difference between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ presenteeism. Good presenteeism, like forcing oneself to go to the gym, refers to overcoming an initial reluctance to show up to work but benefitting from doing so.

However, discussions of presenteeism most often refer to bad presenteeism, defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as ‘staying at work longer than usual, or going to work when you are ill, to show that you work hard and are important to your employer’.

CCMA’s survey of n=303 frontline contact centre colleagues shows that more than one in three, or 36% report that they ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’ turn up to work when they would have rather have taken sick leave.

There are various reasons why people may choose to work while sick: the fear of losing their job, for example, or when working in roles where income depends on hours worked. Within the contact centre, a common reason is not wanting to let others down: absences tend to be keenly felt by other team members. Sometimes individuals may be unaware or unwilling to admit that they are unfit for work. As such, leaders must handle presenteeism sensitively.



“It is important to differentiate between somebody that’s having mental-health problems, versus somebody who is not performing for other reasons. It’s best to take a case-by-case approach.”

- Sarah Card, Head of Delivery and Risk, Marcus by Goldman Sachs

“Sometimes if you try to talk, people can feel attacked. It is very difficult.”

- Georgina Gordon, Head of Wellbeing & Culture, Customer Services, Serco

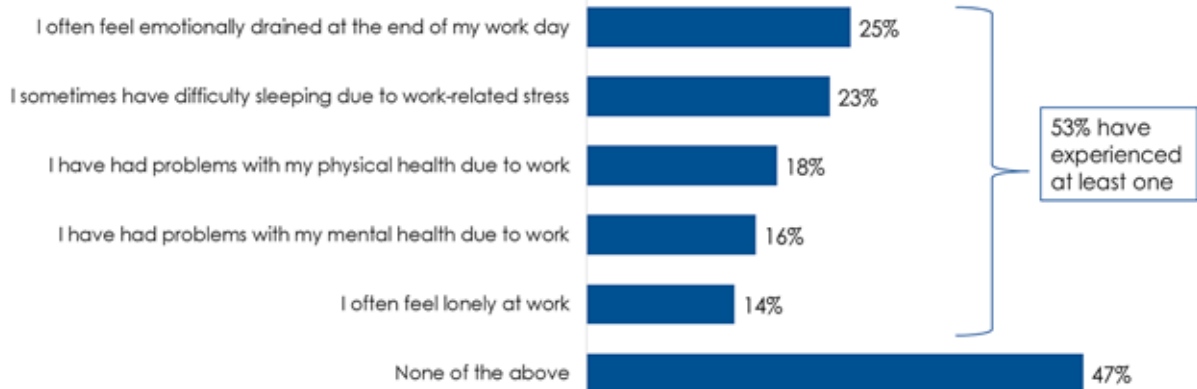
⁹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/presenteeism>

Draining energy

Stress, exhaustion and burnout are conditions that occur when people work for a sustained period of time with depleted energy. The symptoms can be physical or mental and as Figure 2 illustrates, more than half (53%) of frontline colleagues in CCMA's survey report experiencing at least one.

Contact centres are fast-paced, unpredictable environments that demand a lot from the people who work in them. Difficult customers and user-unfriendly systems exacerbate the cognitive load and accelerate the drain on advisors' energy.

Figure 2: The following are a number of statements that may apply to people working in contact centres. Please select the statements that you feel apply to you. Please select as many statements as you'd like, or None of the Above if none apply to you.



Base: n=303

Difficult customers

"We have a system so that people can flag if they've got a difficult or very vulnerable caller. It only takes one or two of those types of call to impact the rest of the day for the agent. We'll go and sit chair-side to give them support." - Julia Brown, Head of Customer Contact, Quilter

"Sometimes people come away feeling helpless, or they'll worry about someone they've spoken to that day and what was the aftermath. That's a big thing for people to take home." - Georgina Gordon, Head of Wellbeing & Culture, Customer Services, Serco

Difficult systems

CCMA's research 'Enabling contact centre advisors in 2022 and beyond' published in October 2021 uncovered how fragmented, unintuitive systems are creating undue cognitive load and

consequent stress on the front line.⁷

Clunky systems as a theme once again features heavily in this research as a recurrent pain point.

"Sometimes I must have had 30-40 tabs open."
- Team Leader

"We had problems with the new system when it was first launched. We didn't have a dialler. We had to use spreadsheets for two months, which was really stressful. Payment wasn't working for a lot of people. And it would crash all the time."
- Advisor

"We're going through the quote and then our system would crash, you'd have to give them a ring back, we'd finish a quote and payment wouldn't work. People thought we were scamming. I lost so many sales. It affected my mental health. I cried in the office." - Advisor

⁷ <https://www.ccma.org.uk/enabling-contact-centre-advisors-in-2022-and-beyond/>

Lack of shrinkage

Leaders and frontline colleagues alike pointed to persistent overload due to lean resourcing as a fundamental factor contributing to wellbeing, and pointed to concrete evidence of a correlation between occupancy and absence rates. This is exacerbated by a challenging business climate putting pressure on budgets.

"I've noticed that contact centres are being seen as cost centres again. The cost versus value centre argument is cyclical. Budgets have shrunk again and therefore there's more pressure on teams. It becomes harder to protect the time, to have in-the-moment conversations. We must not underestimate the importance of building in shrinkage time."

- Emma Dark, Director of Consumer Care UK & IRE, Estée Lauder Companies

A number of contact centre leaders interviewed for this research have seen a direct relationship between high occupancy and absence.

"We showed our ExCo that the higher the occupancy, the more sickness and attrition."

- Julia Brown, Head of Customer Contact, Quilter

"Seasonal flus and other illness are coming back into play now and absence starts to increase at this time of the year. The people that are still here pick up the strain. It feels never-ending when it's happening." - Team Leader

Some leaders voiced the issue of frontline salaries not only keeping pace with cost of living and other sectors, but not reflecting the more demanding nature of the job today.

"In real terms, salaries are probably worse than they were 15 years ago. If we want people to work in this industry and to deliver for customers and deal with complex, highly emotive conversations, instead of working somewhere else without all the stress, we [as contact centre leaders] have a part to play in how we position back to the business."

- Daniel Cohen, Head of Customer Relations, Nespresso

Recharging energy

To avoid burnout there must be opportunities for colleagues to recharge their energy while on the job. To understand the most valuable ways in which energy can be given back to people on the front line, CCMA asked participants to rate their employer across 21 potential factors via a survey (methodology described in the sidebar).

The results of the survey indicate which factors are most impactful to energy and wellbeing; those at the top of the table bring energy to colleagues when provided well, but conversely also drain energy when not provided adequately. All factors are ranked in Figure 3, and the leading factors are pulled out below for contact centres to consider.

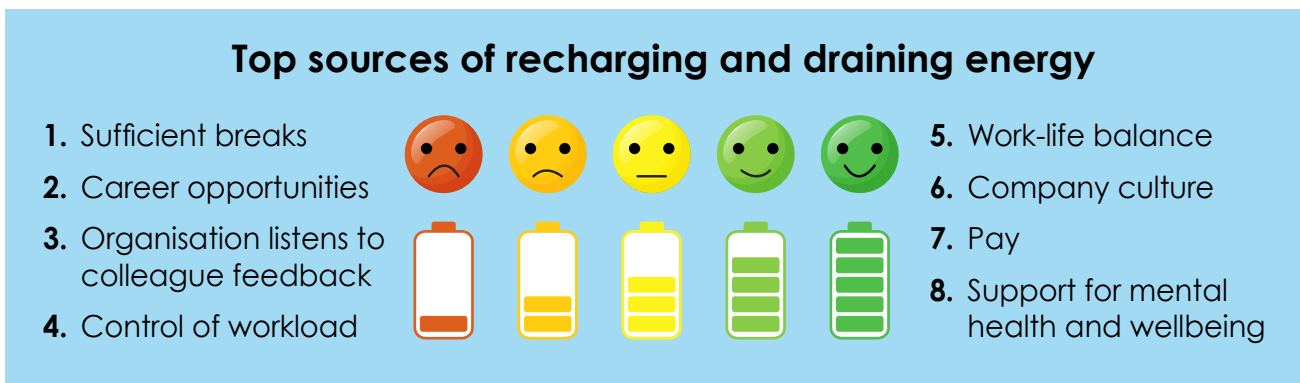


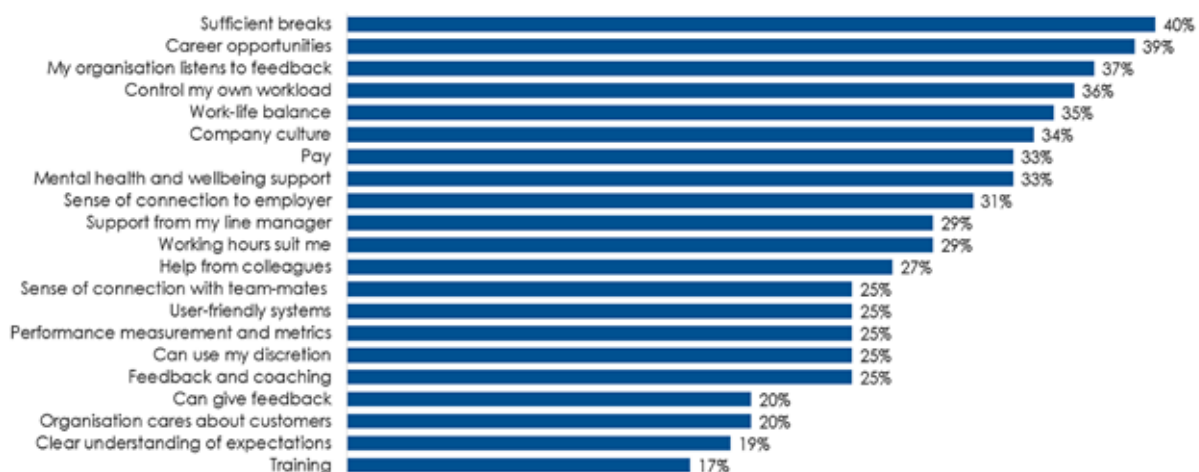
Figure 3 survey methodology

Survey participants were asked to rate their employer on 21 aspects, on a five-point scale ranging from 'very good' to 'very poor'.

A gap analysis compares the share of 'top two box' ('very good' and 'good') ratings among the 53% of frontline colleagues surveyed who reported they had experienced stress symptoms, versus the 47% who reported no symptoms.

Figure 3 shows the percentage-point gap in the share of top-two-box ratings between the two groups. The larger the gap, the more this factor is linked to energy levels and stress.

Figure 3: Percentage-point gaps between "very good" + "good" scores from those whose experience stress or health issues due at work, versus those who do not.



Base: Work stress or health issues n=160, no work stress or health issues n=143

It's getting harder to take breaks

CCMA's survey shows the ability to take breaks when needed is ranked highest of 21 factors that impact wellbeing. Yet in today's contact centre environment, it's harder than it's ever been for frontline colleagues to take breaks. The contact centre has always been a fast-moving, high-pressure environment but ever-rising customer expectations combined with lean resourcing constrained by budgets are pushing some colleagues to their limits.

"What's hard is the always-on. We're all consumers and we want to be able to speak to someone in the moment. This means that we can only give a level of flexibility, because we need to serve unsociable hours. There's loads of talk now about the four-day week. We'd all love that, but you almost want to press mute on the conversation. How do you action that within your contact centre?" - Emma Dark, Director of Consumer Care UK & IRE, Estée Lauder Companies

Some advisors are still forced to abide by a strict quota of personal time when on the clock.

"They know exactly where you are. They know exactly what time you've been off the phone. It's not like a normal job where you could just slip off for 20 minutes. We've got one hour of personal time to use each month. Say I wanted to go to the toilet or I wanted to make myself a cup of tea in between calls. I get one hour a month to do those things. If you go over the hour, they make you try and make the time back. It isn't fair." - Advisor

For all the benefits that self-serve and automation has brought to organisations, it has also contributed to making downtime even more scarce for the people on the front lines. Conversations are becoming more complex and emotive as simpler queries are increasingly handled by self-serve. Advisors who previously

could count on a regular stream of easier calls offering a respite in-between the harder ones, now find themselves having fewer and fewer easy calls to catch a breath.

In response to these changing dynamics, leaders called out the need to be cautious when taking all of the gains promised by automation and self-serve. Instead, it is advisable to hold back some of the resource savings and put some back into shrinkage, to protect frontline teams.

Furthermore, technology can be deployed to help identify and pre-empt signs of stress. For example, conversation analytics can be used to flag distressed advisors who might benefit from an intervention.

Some frontline colleagues experience difficulty staying up to date. With limited free time during working hours, some find themselves having to catch up on essential updates in their own time.

"The onus is on the agent to find information, which is okay if we're quiet, but if we're going through a busy period you can't possibly read everything while you're on back-to-back calls for eight and a half, nine hours a day. So then, when do you read it? I have to in my own time, at night, on the weekend. That's your time, you shouldn't really be spending it checking company updates."

- Team Leader

"If our call forecast comes in and it goes up, and we've scheduled people off for catch-ups or recognition activities but cancel them because we need hands on, it gives the wrong message to individuals. They've prepped for a call with their manager, they've prepped for a conference. It's not their fault these calls have happened. We're seeing a shift in how much can we carry before we start to pull people off things that are equally important." - Georgina Gordon, Head of Wellbeing & Culture, Customer Services, Serco

Building resilience in contact centres

According to Bruce Daisley, author and former Twitter UK executive, resilience is 'the collective strength we gain from each other. In an environment where work is individualistic, the notion that some of us are more resilient than others is often unhelpful and misleading'.

One lasting legacy of the pandemic has been a shift in the burden of responsibility away from

individuals to look after themselves, towards a stronger onus on the employer to create a supportive environment. There is growing recognition that resilience as a collective concept, which organisations play a pivotal role in shaping. It follows that resilience can be formed by culture as well as individuals.

Contact centre leaders identified the following core principles for building resilience:

How to build resilience



- Hire for resilience, but teach it as well
- Set expectations during on-boarding
- Let go of what you cannot control
- Learn to recognise signs of stress, and intervene early
- Leaders exemplify behaviours
- Be mindful of communication out of hours
- Close the loop on colleague feedback

Hire for resilience, but teach it as well

“You can help people make the choice to be resilient through coaching and mentoring. Help people understand what it means to go through the good times and the bad times, and not jump ship as soon as things take a turn for the worse.”

- Daniel Cohen, Head of Customer Relations, Nespresso

“You can't be resilient if you haven't got confidence. And you can't be confident in what you're doing as a job unless you've been well trained, or unless you've been hired with the right skills. It goes right back to the start. If you can start with confidence, this is a good indication of resilience over time.”

- Steve Wrench, Director of Contact Centre, TieTa

Set expectations during onboarding

The contact centre onboarding process has always resembled a 'bootcamp' and with good reason: it is designed to identify those with not only the skills but the fortitude to be able to thrive in the contact centre environment, and to weed out those who do not.

A delicate balance must be achieved during the onboarding period between ensuring individuals understand the nature of the role and have the 'right stuff', versus not overwhelming them to the point of buckling.

“There's no point in selling a role as if everything will be great every single day and you just talk to lovely and patient people all day. Part of building resilience is to be honest about expectations, and the ups and downs so that somebody can

⁸ <https://www.worklife.news/leadership/why-its-time-to-redefine-organizational-resilience-in-the-modern-workplace/>

recognise it and understand that it's perfectly normal, as opposed to 'it's because I've failed'.

- Bridget Colloby, Marketing Lead – Lifestyle, Towergate Insurance

"The first months are really hard. Learning to deal with customers. All of the knowledge to take on. From being offered a role to actually getting into a team and doing your job is very intensive. There's a lot going on, it's very stressful. We've lost people during that period who didn't understand what the role actually entails and how intense it can be." - Team Leader

"Contact centres are better at coaching and developing someone who's been there a year or 18 months and wants to be a leader. We have programmes for that. But for an advisor immediately coming in, how do we identify that potential?" - Daniel Cohen, Head of Customer Relations, Nespresso

Let go of what you cannot control

The feeling of being in control is a building block of wellbeing. Yet frontline colleagues in the contact centre constantly struggle to feel in control, due to root causes that lie outside of their ability to directly influence.

For frontline colleagues, the satisfaction of helping customers is a huge reward and motivation in and of itself. Conversely, the frustration of not being able to help can be massively draining.

"The pandemic has created a lot more mental health conditions, including children that weren't able to be with friends anymore and weren't getting adequate schooling. And the mental health sector is so under-resourced. It's soul-destroying to know that probably more than once-a-day we will have to say to someone, I'm really sorry but there isn't anybody currently that can see your child." - Team Leader

"As a BPO a lot of our customers create the scripts. Our people feel very restricted. Individuals want to be able to elaborate but they're not allowed to go off script." - Georgina Gordon, Head of Wellbeing & Culture, Customer Services, Serco

Some leaders have addressed head-on the frustration of not being in control, acknowledging it is a reality of the job, and helping colleagues to overcome.

"We have something like a swear bucket in the office. If there's something we really want to change but can't, then rather than spending our time complaining and using up a lot of energy we write it down, it goes in the bucket and we move on to instead focus on things we can control. It helps us let go of stuff and redirect our energy into more positive areas." - Daniel Cohen, Head of Customer Relations, Nespresso

One way to help individuals address the feeling of losing control is to put things into context: as crucial as contact centre work is, in most instances it is not life and death.

"Our role is to help contextualise and to normalise as much as possible. We're not providing critical services or saving lives. Without dumbing it down or understating the importance of what we do, I try to take some of the heat out of a situation and nip it in the bud as it's happening, helping my people know when something really is a problem and when it's not." - Emma Dark, Director of Consumer Care UK & IRE, Estée Lauder Companies

Learn to recognise signs and intervene early

In recent years, awareness of wellbeing has rapidly grown and stigmas have been lowered, but it is still difficult for many individuals to come forward or even recognise they are in need of help. As such, managers still own the responsibility of spotting the signs of colleagues in difficulty. Our leaders discussed some of the tell-tale signals:

“A falloff in quality for one is a good indicator that they’re skimming things, paying lip service, they’ve had enough and they need a break.” - Steve Wrench, Director of Contact Centre, TieTa

“You can see physically when people are struggling just by their posture and engagement, even when on video.” - Emma Dark, Director of Consumer Care UK & IRE, Estée Lauder Companies

Spotting the signs can be harder in a remote environment. And without the routine and discipline of going to an office, the option to work from home takes away the option of ‘good’ presenteeism.

“We struggle with spotting signs of stress or worry home-working population. You’re not necessarily talking to people every single day. We rely on them more to reach out, but we know a lot of people don’t.” - Georgina Gordon, Head of Wellbeing & Culture, Customer Services, Serco

“People wouldn’t put the camera on because they hadn’t dressed, they hadn’t washed. The whole thing about coming into work is that you’re in the zone. You’re dressed, you’re ready for it.” - Julia Brown, Head of Customer Contact, Quilter

Leaders exemplify behaviours

Leading by example with consistent modelling of behaviours is the cornerstone of building and reinforcing culture. Leading organisations articulate desired behaviours in explicit communication, which is reinforced by leaders who demonstrate those behaviours on a daily basis.

“Everybody displaying those characteristics, the way we do things around here, through the line. Not just in my team.” - Lucie Child, Strategy Lead, The Very Group

“The management here aren’t like in my last job which was in retail. Back then you could tell who was a manager because they had sort of personality about them. They had things to do. Here, I couldn’t really tell who was who, because we’re all together, all one, the same people. Here managers don’t behave any differently because they have more power than you do.” - Advisor

Be mindful of communication out of hours

As flexible working has become the norm, different individuals have established different working hours to suit circumstances and preferences. Many organisations have defined a set of ‘core hours’ during which colleagues are expected to be contactable. Leaders should be mindful when communicating outside of these core hours, recognising that others may not be online during the same hours.

“If I send an email or Teams message at six, seven, eight o’clock at night, I don’t want anyone to answer it right away unless I specifically request it. It’s just me doing that because I’ll forget it by tomorrow morning! I’ve got to set the example which I hope will cascade down to agents as well.” - Steve Wrench, Director of Contact Centre, TieTa

“I put on the bottom of my emails that I choose to work flexibly and I may send emails outside of regular office hours where it suits my schedule. But please don’t expect a response to my emails outside of your hours.” - Sarah Card, Head of Delivery and Risk, Marcus by Goldman Sachs

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"It suits me to log on early and get ahead of my day. But I am mindful to schedule my emails so they send during 'normal' hours, to set the right tone and to avoid my team thinking that emails early or late in the day is expected." - Emma

Dark, Director of Consumer Care UK & IRE, Estée Lauder Companies

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Close the loop on colleague feedback

Just as closing the loop with customers is one of the guiding principles of good Voice of Customer practice, closing the loop with colleagues is essential to ensure they feel recognised and listened to. Soliciting colleague feedback and sharing back updates helps colleagues feel a sense of control and forward progress; and that they have a role to play in addressing root causes and influencing positive change.

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"We recently did a staff survey. Other than that, I wouldn't say there's too many opportunities to give feedback, being honest." - Advisor

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"We brought in something called Make a Difference. People can suggest script changes which go to our transformation team to look into, and then take to the client." - Georgina Gordon, Head of Wellbeing & Culture, Customer Services, Serco

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"You might not be able to completely resolve something that day. But if you've made progress and you've helped it's important to understand and recognise the positive part you play. Even when an end-to-end fix isn't possible, this can help people to feel better." - Bridget Colloby, Marketing Lead – Lifestyle, Towergate Insurance

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How much support should organisations provide?

As awareness of wellbeing has grown and the breadth and depth of support provided by employers has proliferated, a new question has emerged: when the onus is on employers to help, where to draw the line? Mental health first aiders

are now common in the UK workplace, but should employers go further and offer help to colleagues seeking qualified medical practitioners? This question becomes acute in light of current waiting times for public health services.

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"Obviously, you want to help and most businesses will have employee-assistance programmes. But at the end of the day, we're managers, not specialists. It's is very much a case of you know, where do we refer and when to refer." - Julia Brown, Head of Customer Contact, Quilter

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"Some people expected our mental health first-aid trainers to be counsellors. They've had a couple of days' training. They're not counsellors. A lot of mental health first-aiders stepped down because of this, because it was too much. Employee-assistance programmes are great but people need other channels too that are immediately available to them. They're on waiting lists. It's very difficult to manage that." - Georgina Gordon, Head of Wellbeing & Culture, Customer Services, Serco

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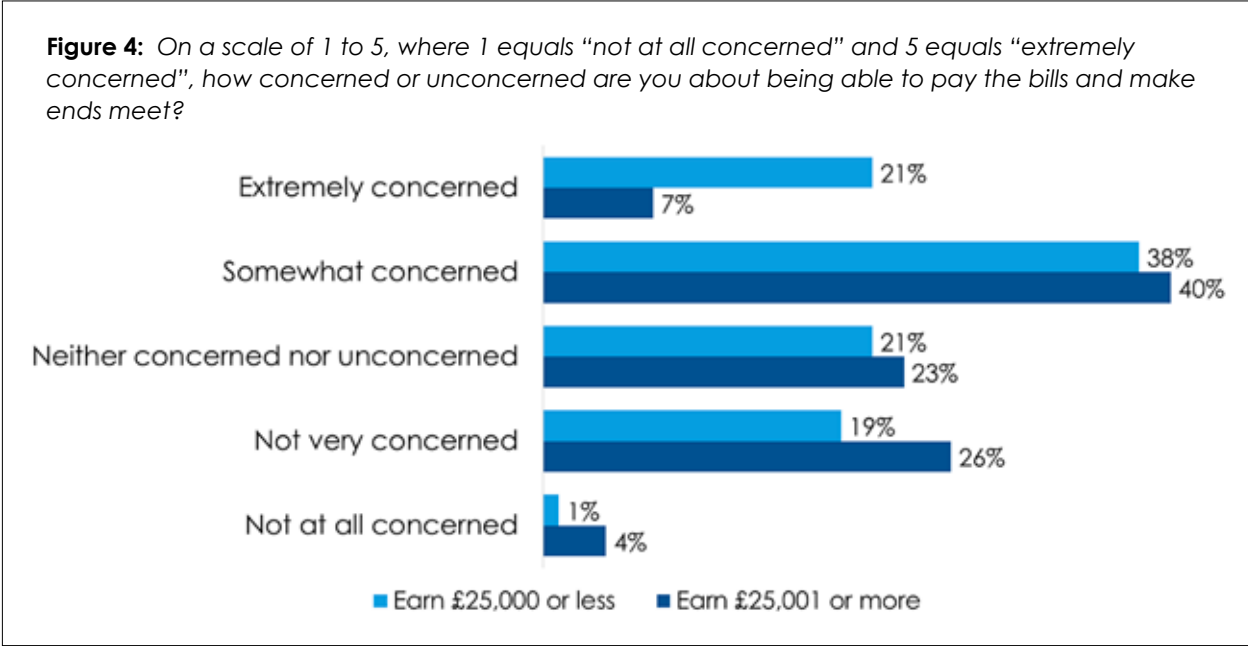
The link between financial and emotional resilience

In 2023 the UK faces deep economic challenges including rapid inflation far outstripping wage growth.

More than half of those working on the contact centre front lines (52%) are concerned about their ability to pay the bills and make ends meet.

CCMA's survey of the front line demonstrates a clear link between financial and emotional resilience, with colleagues earning the median advisor annual income of £25,000⁹ or less being

three times as likely to report feeling 'extremely concerned' about their financial wellbeing, compared with those earning above median wage.



28% of frontline colleagues say they have cut back on essentials such as food and energy

17% say they have used a food bank in the past year

23% say they already spend more time in the office due to rising energy costs, and a further 41% say they may do so in the future

⁹ <https://www.ccma.org.uk/the-uk-contact-centre-salary-and-skills-guide/>

According to the Office for National Statistics, 30% of people in the UK say they would not be able to afford an unexpected expense of £850.¹⁰ Among frontline colleagues in the contact centre the proportion is very similar (29%). However, as Figure 5 shows, the ability to withstand a sudden

expenditure is markedly different for people earning above versus below median wage. Those earning £25,000 or less are almost twice as likely to say they could not afford £850, compared with those earning £25,001 or more (40% versus 21%).

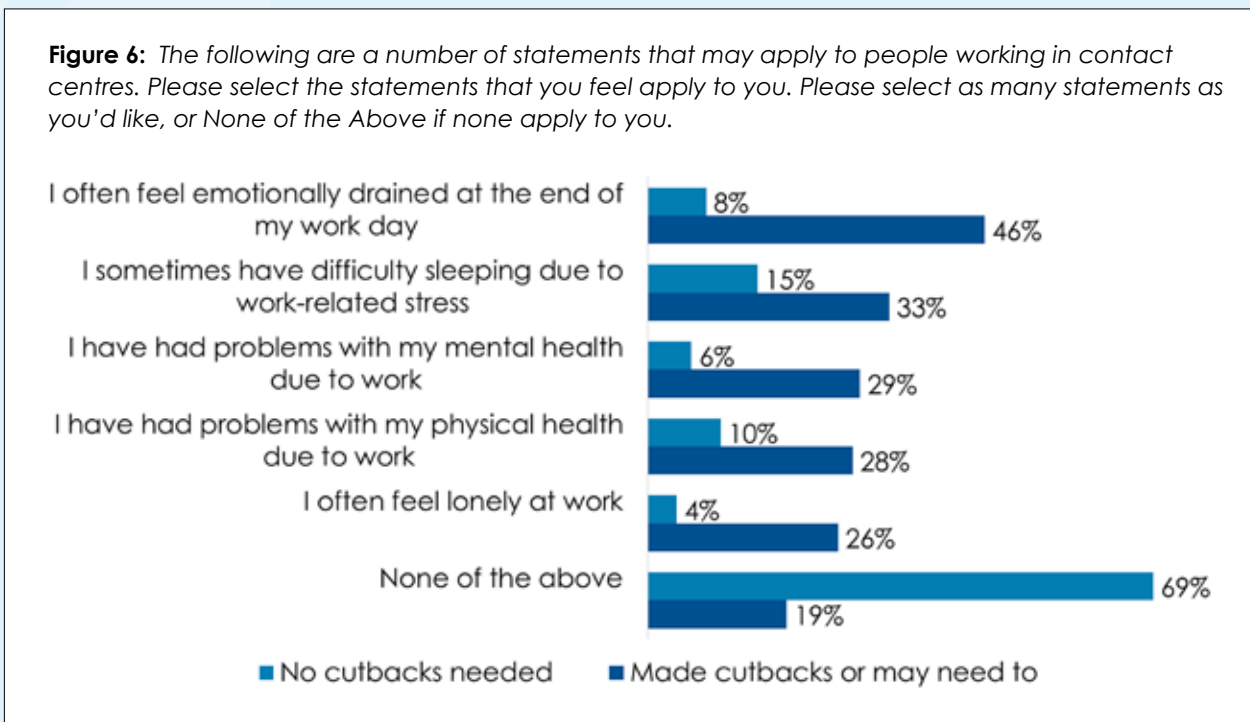
Figure 5: Could you / your household afford to pay an unexpected, but necessary, expense of £850?



Base: Earn £25,000 or less n=129, earn £25,001 or more n=174

People who have or may need to cut back on essentials are much more likely to report symptoms of job-related stress or health problems, as Figure 6 shows.

Figure 6: The following are a number of statements that may apply to people working in contact centres. Please select the statements that you feel apply to you. Please select as many statements as you'd like, or None of the Above if none apply to you.



Base: No cutbacks needed n=169, Have made cutbacks or may need to in future n=134

¹⁰ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/expenditure/adhoc/15215publicopinionsandsocialtrendsabilitytoaffordanunexpectedexpenseof850bydifficultyaffordingrentormortgagepaymentsgreatbritain12to23october2022>

Colleagues in the contact centre who have or may need to cut back on essential spending are 2.5 times more likely to report at least one symptom of work-related stress, compared with those who foresee no cutbacks needed (81% versus 31%).

Specific challenges for commission-based roles

Some colleagues who work in sales roles and for whom commission comprises a large share of income are particularly feeling the pinch. Feast and famine has always been a reality in sales, but in a cost-of-living crisis colleagues on relatively low base salaries are more reliant than ever on commission to make ends meet.

“Everyone is starting to feel the pull on their purse strings. It’s really quite draining at the moment. We’re working harder than ever but aren’t able to really go out and enjoy ourselves. I’m just coasting because I’ve got to save the money. It’s hard.”

- Advisor

“When you’ve had a good month, you feel really good. But if you’ve not had a particularly good month it affects your mental health.” - Advisor

“It feels like dread. You don’t know if you can earn your money or not. You worry about it at night, in the morning, on the weekend. You’re worried about it and you’re dreaming about it as well.”

- Advisor

Pressure on earnings can be compounded by financial penalties imposed for quality lapses.

“If you get a complaint, they take money off. I understand they’re doing it to try and reduce complaints, but I don’t think it’s fair. They take £150

out of your commission. Your manager also gets hit as well, £50 or £75 docked from their commission.”

- Advisor

“Even something like not pressing a button properly or putting down the wrong number, if it’s seen as damaging the customer in any way, even though the customer probably wouldn’t be bothered, you fail the QA. If you fail one, you lose half your bonus. And if you fail two you get none of your bonus. Even if it’s the customer who trips you up. Customers can talk and talk and sometimes they can almost make you fail.” - Advisor

Adequate base salaries mitigate the pressure on sales advisors and also help to prevent the wrong behaviours from sales people desperate for commission.

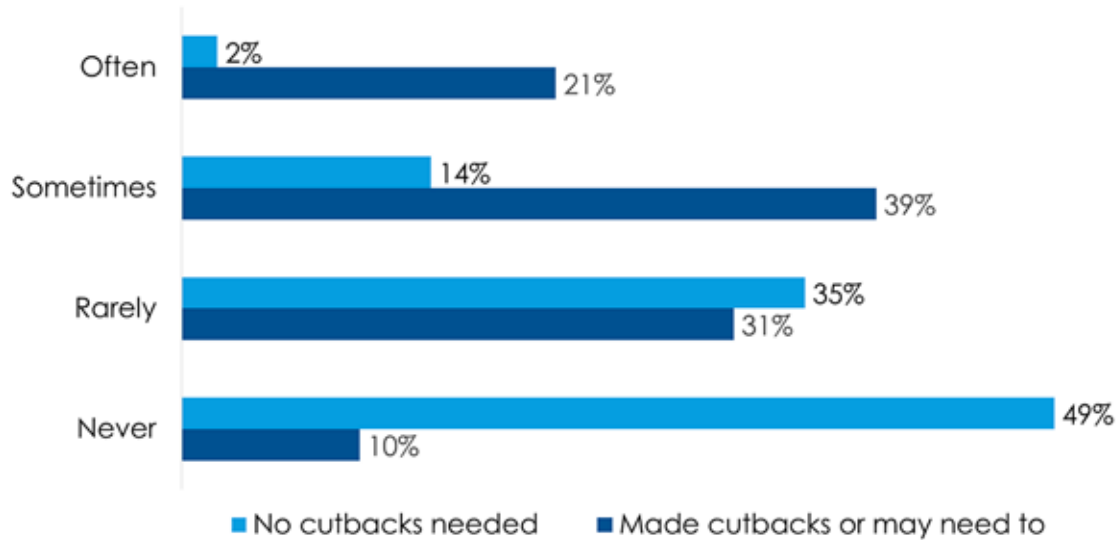
“Your CSI score needs to be at least 4.5 out of 5 for you to hit your bonus.” - Advisor

“I’ve seen it before, where people do something dodgy to hit the targets out of desperation.”

- Advisor

Financial constraint is linked to presenteeism, as Figure 7 shows.

Figure 7: Do you ever show up to work when you would have rather called in sick?



Base: No cutbacks needed n=169; Have made cutbacks or may need to in future n=134

Colleagues in the contact centre who have or may need to cut back on essential spending are almost four times as likely to say they 'sometimes' or 'often' show up for work when they are sick, compared with those who foresee no cutbacks needed (60% versus 16%).

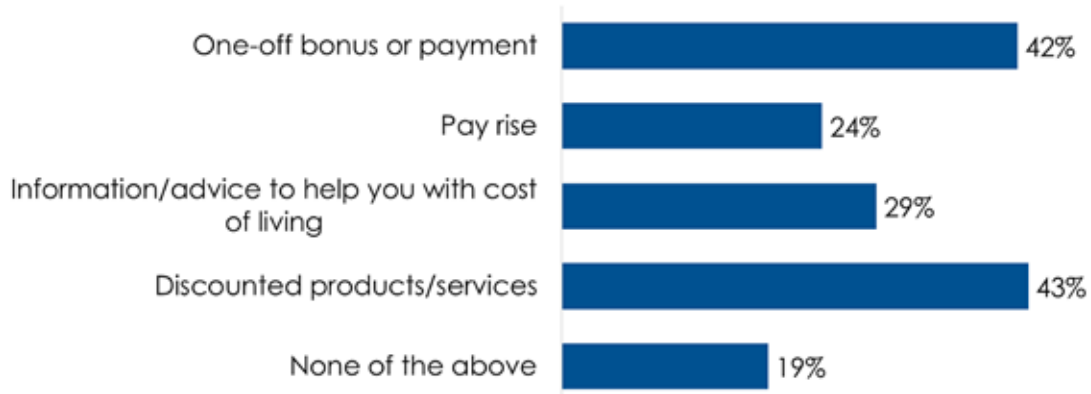
"Last month I had Covid and couldn't go in. I couldn't manage to get the system working on my laptop at home, so I wasn't able to work from home and I didn't hit my bonus. This month will be really tight." - Advisor

How employers are helping to build financial resilience

While the CCMA survey highlights the acute financial challenges faced by some on the front line, it also reveals the widespread support that

contact centres are providing. As Figure 8 shows, the vast majority of colleagues are benefitting from employer-provided support, with 42% reporting they have received a one-off bonus payment in the past year. Subsidised or free food and drink in the office is also becoming more commonplace in contact centres.

Figure 8: Has your employer made any of the following available to you in 2022? Please select all that apply.



Base: n=303

.....
“Just last month, anybody earning less than £50,000 got a £500 cost of living payment. I thought that was really good. The company really tries to look after the staff.” - Team Leader

.....
“We’ve got free food and drink in the office. So if people are struggling at home to feed themselves, they can get free breakfast and free lunch and free hot drinks.” - Team Leader

Since the pandemic, wellbeing support has become very much the norm in the workplace, with the presence of mental health first-aiders for example having rapidly become widespread, as well as managers receiving specific wellbeing training. As 2023 progresses, it is certain that contact centres will continue to bolster the support they provide to help colleagues cope with rising costs, either in terms of direct financial contributions or offering discounts and information and advice.

Colleague wellbeing in contact centres: 8 discoveries

- 1** Signs of work-related stress or burnout are widespread, with more than half of frontline colleagues (53%) reporting at least one symptom of work-related stress or burnout.
- 2** More than one in three colleagues (36%) report they 'sometimes' or 'often' turn up for work when sick. This reflects commitment – but working when unfit is bad for both colleague and customer.
- 3** The ability to take breaks is the most important factor separating those who experience signs of stress and burnout versus those who do not.
- 4** It's getting harder to take breaks and recharge during the work day. The cognitive load on the front line is becoming consistently more intense as simpler queries that offer advisors respite are increasingly deflected to self-serve.
- 5** Building shrinkage time into resourcing plans is essential to allow people to take breaks.
- 6** Resilience is a collective concept and organisations and leaders have a critical role to play as the onus has shifted from self-managing to organisations' responsibility to support.
- 7** The rising cost of living is hitting colleagues hard, with more than half (52%) concerned about their ability to pay the bills and make ends meet.
- 8** Employers are stepping up to provide support, with 42% of frontline colleagues receiving a bonus and 24% having had a pay rise in 2022.

About the CCMA

The CCMA is the longest established association representing the call centre industry in the UK. We support contact centre managers through providing opportunities to network; to openly share best practice and to increase their skills and knowledge through specialist training.

Our aim is to offer timely and impartial advice to our members; to keep contact centre leaders in touch with changes in their industry; to provide credible benchmarking information and to help individuals maintain an awareness of the latest trends and developments.

Our membership association is not for profit, and our board is made up of people who work full time in the industry in operational roles. We are run by our members for our members.

For more information: www.ccma.org.uk | [@CCMATalk](https://twitter.com/CCMATalk)

About Sabio

Sabio Group is a global digital customer experience (CX) transformation specialist with major operations in the UK (England and Scotland), Spain, France, Netherlands, Malaysia, Singapore, South Africa and India.

The Group delivers solutions and services that seamlessly combine digital and human interactions to support outstanding customer experiences.

Through its own technology, and that of world-class technology leaders such as Amazon Connect, Avaya, Genesys, Google Cloud, Salesforce, Twilio and Verint, Sabio helps organisations optimise their customer journeys by making better decisions across their multiple contact channels.

The Group works with major brands worldwide, including Aegon, AXA Assistance, BBVA, BGL, Caixabank, DHL, loveholidays, Marks & Spencer, Rentokil, Essent, GovTech, HomeServe, Saga, Sainsbury's Argos, Telefónica and Transcom Worldwide.

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